To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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The Church's Responsibility for Rural Life

An American Point of View

By Don F. Pielstick*

Among American Protestant churches there exists a wide divergence of opinion as to the nature of the responsibility which the Church has for rural life. This difference of opinion arises from other divergent views, such as, (1) the nature of the Church itself, (2) the function of rural life, and (3) the part local congregations should assume in the societal aspects of contemporary life. There are local congregations which assume their responsibility is solely that of initiating an emotional experience in the life of each person, so that each person will identify himself with a local congregation as a faithful participant. There are other congregations which assume their responsibility is largely that of leading the populace in the observance of the "right" religious acts. Again, there are congregations which generally ignore both emotionalism and ritualism and, appealing to the rational, assume their responsibility is to persuade men to accept the scientific knowledge available and apply this knowledge to society and the physical world.

Somewhere between these extreme positions and partaking of certain elements of each is the point of view that guides the Department of Town and Country Church. It is not adverse to emotional experiences, to religious ritual, nor to the rational scientific approach, but it does hold that these should be realistically related to ethical and social behavior. Now let me state a few basic assumptions upon which the responsibility of the Church, as set forth in this paper, is based.

First, that "the earth is the Lord's" -- the soil, the forests, the animals, the mineral resources, and that mankind is here as the Lord's steward "to dress it and to keep it." Second, that the Lord God is just and does not treat his stewards unjustly. But more than that, he is a loving and merciful God who forgives the sins of his stewards when they acknowledge the error of their ways and ask his pardon. Third, that the relationship between the stewards and the Lord is meant to be a good and pleasant one. The stewards are not tortured by

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the Lord but rather bring suffering upon themselves through ignorance, lack of faith in the Lord to create and sustain, and willful arrogance, pride, and selfishness.

Fourth, that the Church (and I try to make clear throughout a distinction between organizational expression of the Church in the hands of man and therefore partaking of man's nature) is the instrument in the hands of God for the redemption of man. It is not only responsible for preparing man for ultimate things but also responsible for preparing him to live here and now. Fifth, that in the life, work, and message of the churches the people should find the struggle of living a joyous contest always undertaken with confidence that victory will be forthcoming in this life. At the same time people should understand man's sinful nature, assured that God counts our faith in victory as righteousness rather than our works.

Based on these five assumptions, I shall deal with four major aspects of rural life as it applies to the spiritual well-being, to the physical well-being, to the social structure, and to the integration of rural life.

The Primary Responsibility

The primary responsibility of the Church, basic to all others, is for the spiritual well-being of all people. In facing up to this the American churches are confronted by a most trying dilemma: that of the multiplicity of our denominations. Many rural communities have more church organizations and church houses than can be effectively maintained. In these communities there is not enough lay leadership to fill all responsible positions and, when filled, the membership of the group is often so small that the purpose cannot be achieved. Discouragement and loss of needed group expression in the church is the result.

Therefore, America has many rural communities overchurched so far as organizations and buildings are concerned but underserved in terms of dynamic Christian organizations. They not only have a lack of effective church group organizations but also frequently lack the services of a full-time resident clergyman. We are confronted with the paradoxical situation that most of the people claim some church relationship but the churches claim in membership only about fifty-four per cent of the people. And only about twenty-five per cent of the membership claimed by the churches is active.

The majority of the denominations frankly admit that this situation is undesirable and hinders the Church from fulfilling its responsibility. In 1947 churchmen with special assignments for rural life were asked to study the rural situation and plan a program of advance. Their first statement of responsibility was "to present the Christian Gospel in its fullness in every rural community in America, making it functional as a cohesive force in every area and interest of rural life...." Recognizing this, the churches find themselves in the predicament stated by St. Paul: those things they would not, they do; and those things they would, they do not. Their vested interests, denominational pride, and tradition stand in their way.

However, much progress is being made, and as the ecumenical movement gathers momentum, the churches are becoming more aware of the primary function of the Church. This is indicated by their development of a paper, "Churching the Rural Community Cooperatively," which states the principles of church administration and program organization which they favor. But, even when denominational leaders as churchmen unitedly agree upon a plan for the more effective churching

of rural America, the problem is not solved. The lay people in the churches must also catch the vision of the primary function of the Church, for until they do they reflect a spiritual deficiency. This deficiency is today markedly noticeable in most rural communities.

There is another side to this responsibility for spiritual well-being, that of rounding out the program of the local parish so as to meet the varied spiritual needs of the people. Worship, religious education, and fellowship should not only be provided for all rural people but the churches should not be content until these are provided with a relevance to common everyday experiences. The relevance which the churches should seek is that of a spiritual and Christian content in face-to-face relations, in neighborhoodness or social mutuality, in the stewardship of national resources, and in the responsibility for production of food and fibre to meet human need. The Church alone is responsible for interpreting these common ventures of rural life in the light of the Christian world view.

Responsibility in View of Social Change

Rural life in America is undergoing tremendous changes. Modern transportation has broken up the closely-knit neighborhood of horse-and-buggy days. Mechanization of agricultural processes is making for larger farms, and these are more self-contained as operational units. The application of the physical sciences to animal life, crops, and soils seems, in the minds of many, to favor a naturalistic and humanistic interpretation of life. Herein lies a real challenge to the Church.

First, the challenge to the institutional expression of the Church. We are having great difficulty in adapting our organization of congregations to the changing social structure. While I do not know of any adequate documentation, it has been reported that Protestantism in the United States has lost a thousand rural churches a year for twenty years. This loss should be evaluated as an indication of social change and not entirely as unfavorable to the adequate churching of rural America. Many churches which have been lost were never much more than Sunday schools or preaching stations. Consequently, a loss of population in the neighborhood or the drawing off of supporters through modern transportation resulted in the closing of the church. If churches in larger population centers are not cognizant of their responsibility to serve outlying areas, then some neighborhoods may be more poorly served than before. On the other hand, the change may strengthen the town church and thereby make possible a more adequate ministry for all people.

Don F. Pielstick

Second, the challenge arising out of social change involves the pattern of the social organization which develops. Many of us believe the Church has a responsibility to bear all possible influence during periods of rapid social change so as to cast the new social structure in a mold favorable to Christian living. The application of physical sciences to agriculture and the mechanization of labor processes can lead to a strictly materialistic evaluation. In such a development man becomes subordinate to the things he has created. There is much more required of a society favorable to Christian living than operating farm units at the lowest possible cost and highest profit.

Third, the challenge of social change is that of the interpretation of the meaning of life. It is easy for churchmen to assume that they are not concerned with the size of farms, mechanization, and scientific agriculture. But if they do not know what is going on in these areas, they may soon find that the principles and programs they support are far removed from the concerns of rural people. We hold that there is a deeper meaning in farm life than the margin of profit; that mechanization should relieve man of the drudgery of manual labor and not simply increase his productive ability; that scientific knowledge of agriculture should be used to increase production and should not be allowed to usurp man's reliance upon God as Creator.

Responsibility for Physical Well-Being

Another responsibility of the Church is for the physical well-being of the people. It seems quite evident in the Scriptures that the Lord meant for mankind to live a good life; to have the necessities of food, shelter, and raiment; to participate as responsible beings in economic undertakings and social relations; to be able to appreciate and give expression to the beautiful and harmonious. In consideration of this a group of American rural churchmen gathered in 1949 and produced a statement on "A Protestant Policy on Rural Economics and Social Relations." This paper states that "it is important that the churches develop a policy for rural life which embraces the economic, social, cultural, educational, and other facets of life, which are interrelated."

When the Church acts responsibly toward rural life, it builds into the minds of men a vision of what rural living might be like if righteousness should reign and men fulfilled their stewardship before God. It gives these men a new scale of values which is far more than materialistic possibility or profitability. Through this scale of values men come to see rural life in terms of what it does to human lives. When this happens, the Church is fulfilling its responsibility for physical well-being.

I would like to add one more element: the responsibility for the aesthetic, the appreciation and expression of the beautiful and harmonious. When the Church leads men into right relations with God the Creator, the lives of those men ought to reflect the symmetry and beauty of God's handiwork. Too often our rural churches have been interested mainly in doctrine and ritual.

Integration or Wholeness

The Church is also responsible for integration or wholeness in rural life. Some would refer to this as "community." A satisfactory rural life must consist of more than high social and economic standards; more than good recreation, health, government, schools, and churches; more than beautiful surroundings -- as essential as these are. It must be integrated into a wholeness which reflects the Christian world-view, the oneness which is in the purpose of God.

This is the mutuality of believers which extends into all areas of life, all group relations, and all the joys and sorrows of daily living. But it is also more than that. It is the expression in the social group of that divine attribute which "numbers the hairs of our heads and knows even when a sparrow falls." In rural areas the small groupings lend themselves readily to the fulfilling of such responsibility. The large number of common interests favors it. But most significant of all is the ever present illustration of the continuing of God's creative processes in nature.

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